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Indie Eh? Some kind of Game Studies¹

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Abstract

This introduction to this special issue of *Loading...* considers the articles of the issue in the context of game studies' growing interest in, and implication with, the cultures of independent game development and the 'indie scene' in general. 'Indie' is the question not the answer for the authors of this issue. Together the articles herald a long term collaborative program of research that implicates concerns with the discrete and varied cultural contexts of game production, a recognition of the nuances and diversity in the tastes and values of players, and the place of digital games and game discourses in shaping and reshaping the public sphere. After this issue, we may argue about whether game studies has finally found its object but we can all agree that our engagement with the question of 'indie' has intriguing implications for the future of our work as games researchers, designers and cultural political actors.

Author Keywords

Indie, independent games, cultural analysis, game studies, cultural movements

This Indie Thing

What is this Indie thing? Are we talking about a social movement, an art movement, a cultural scene, a fad, an ethics, a value orientation, a social identity, an assertion of authority, a cultural politics, an accident, a new form of capitalism...?

One might suggest that in game studies we have been blindsided. While many of us were grappling with grinding and farming in *The World of Warcraft*, musing over the narrative possibilities and conservatism in *Mass Effect* or fretting about the implication of the military-entertainment complex in *Call of Duty* or *Halo*, this little 'thing' snuck up on us. Certainly the attention given to the analysis of independent games, gaming or game development as evidenced in the pages of our various journals do not quite seem to mirror the scale of indie related cultural commentary we have been witnessing in the past few years.

This could in part be due to the fact that most game studies scholars do not tend to play independent games but it also might be that the indieness of the games we play has never been much of an issue before. It is something of a truism in most game studies that the meaning of a

game as interactive media lies in the contexts of play and not of production. A game can be produced in the context of a multinational “triple-A” publisher or a two-person garage studio and be equally engaging, equally meaningful or equally banal. We have been, in principle, equal opportunity analysts. Or, at least, there has been nothing in our ludologies, narratologies, proceduralities or anything else to suggest that *Grand Theft Auto* rather than *Fez* should be the primary object of our attention.

Maybe this has been a failure of our field or our immaturity as aca-gamers and player-analysts but we have collectively tended to play, think about, and write about the games that are popular in the mass culture sense of the term. Until recently the structures of marketing, publishing and distribution in the games industry meant that the most popular games tended to be from the large studios and publishers but that has changed. Since 2006 or so the political economies and practices of game making have shifted and convulsed and the cultures of game playing have aged, matured and diversified. Now games like *Braid*, *World of Goo* and *Minecraft* sit atop the Metacritic all-time “best-of” lists alongside the usual suspects and we have no excuse.

There is no doubt that game studies will catch up to culture even as other academic disciplines catch up to game studies. I have always been amazed and thrilled at how deftly our object escapes our collective grasp and at the inability of our dominant institutionalized modes of writing and reflection to keep pace. We do indeed live in a time of ‘fast’ culture and game cultures are some of the fastest. The pace of things threatens to leave the analytic and critical apparatus’ of researchers in the dust so surely this is a challenge worth getting up in the morning for. In the old days it was enough to wait for the dust to settle as the object takes on a coherent form amenable to the critical analytic traditions of our fields. Now the dust just swirls around and answering the question ‘what is a video game?’ or ‘what is an independent video game?’ will always lag by at least six months to a year or more.

Such is seemingly the case with the discussion of indie games. There is no point in seeking a formal definition or classification of ‘indie games’ any more than it has helped us to try to define ‘video games.’ The best we can do is follow, articulate, and perhaps join in with, other actors’ attempts to do work with the concept. Game designers, producers, entrepreneurs, artists, journalists, reviewers, curators, educators, hackers, makers, and gamers all mobilize the term. Our chief task, as we shall see with the papers in this special issue, is to figure out what they are trying to do with it.

Yet, there is perhaps something more going on also. There is something happening to game studies itself that is augmented by the pull to articulate what is going on with this indie thing. The term ‘indie’ or ‘independent game’ somehow forces a shift in analytic attention not often found in the analysis of other video games. Indie games are not a genre like platformer, RPG, shooter or puzzle games are genres. And while indie can refer to a discrete visual or design style it more often refers to the provenance of the game; to those who made it and the specific conditions under which it was made and distributed. To speak of an indie game, unlike other video games, is to speak, often very passionately, about the context of the production of that game. To speak of indie games is not to speak only of the games themselves or of the experiences of gameplay but rather of the cultures of game development from whence they came.

There is the question of who or what is indie? Where do they come from? How do they work? But this “they” begs the question. It is a “they” in-the-making who appear simultaneously as a legal-economic category (developer controlled IP), a social identity for a group or groups of game developers, a set of ideas or an ideology about developer freedom, creativity and autonomy (the idea of ‘being indie’) and a cultural style or set of styles. In this unsettled mix is a new sort of object for game studies – less of a game-as-played and more of a game-as-made.

Here I do not mean the idea of games as designed or intended by an author or artist but rather the political, economic and cultural contexts of production that allow us to see a game as a designed or intended work. The construction of authorship, creativity and authenticity in indie game making is but one small piece of the puzzle. Indie games call our attention to many layers of complexity besides this including the material practices of design, work-life balance, the inclusivity and diversity of developer cultures, the chains of signification linking production and consumption (developers and players), structures and ideologies of the creative economy, the larger media ecology and questions of cultural and creative value. All of these were legitimate concerns of game studies analysis before this ‘indie’ thing came along but in following the consideration of games as indie or not we are forced, in new ways, to attend to the specificities of all games-as-made.

Provenance has always mattered economically and especially in the marketing of games. The Ubisoft logo on the *Assassins Creed* box is already a signifier of provenance. The logo serves as the referent for a chain of associations (technologies, design decisions, workflow, unit sales) that tie a player’s discrete play of a game (any single play session of *Assassins Creed 3*) to the social-technical institutional apparatus that made it possible. But these associations are difficult to trace and tend to be smoothed over to produce the best possible economic story (consider the anatomy of the typical industry ‘post-mortem’).

Indie games invite attention to provenance in more critical analytic ways, but not in the traditional negative sense that the political economic analysis of critical media studies tends to convey. In the political economic context of a game like *Call of Duty* one might rightly worry about the degree to which each frantic button press makes a player complicit in the new order capitalism of the military-entertainment complex. This is seemingly not a concern for games like *Super Meat Boy* or *Flower*.

The provenance of video games in traditional political economy always seems deeper and darker than the data would warrant even if it were the proper antidote to the Ubisoft logo. Independent games however, invite us to focus on the complexities of the ways that games are made and on the micro-economics and idiocultures of game production and consumption. The stories of the provenance of indie games are no less romantic and smoothed over than those of Ubisoft (see for instance the 2012 docudrama, *Indie Game: The Movie*) but playing an indie game as an *indie* game makes us attend closely to, and even participate, in the mode of production of the games we play and study.

I am not sure that playing *Sword and Sworcery* brings us closer to a political economic media revolution any more than playing *Left4Dead* takes us further away but an engagement with a

game as indie does effect our understanding of what digital games are and how they work as culture.

The Shapes of Indie

The purpose of this special issue is to start a discussion about game studies approaches to the question of indie. Partly, I wanted to use the issue as an opportunity to educate myself by bringing together scholars who have pondering the question longer and more deeply than I, but more than this I see an opportunity for a sustained collaborative research program with indie as the empirical excuse for both bringing like minded researchers together as well as moving our conversations more directly into the public sphere. The object is still moving fast and we will need to grab on relatively quickly and keep up if we are to be at all useful.

This issue consists of seven reviewed papers and four shorter invited articles. Initially, I had wanted to focus on the Canadian context for indie game development but I was persuaded by the abstracts I received based on my initial call for papers that academic nationalism is not well suited to this topic. I was driven initially by a genuine national concern for the absence of Canadian owned and controlled IP in the mainstream game industry despite Canada's standing as one of the top game producing nations in the world. A few of us shared the idea that a robust indie scene in Canada could be a starting point for a solution to this problem in Canada but not only is the sense of this problem not shared by many of the developers we have talked with but there was a growing sense that indie games had a global dimension that needs to be puzzled through. I opted in the end for a more pluralistic issue with a somewhat Toronto and Montreal-centric focus. It is enough to get the national conversation started if the sense develops that it is warranted and in the meantime the articles help establish a basis for thinking about the shape of the indie game scene in almost any locality.

Together, the articles begin to establish the basis for a continued collective discussion that attempts to balance an attention to the ideological and discursive regimes that give meaning to the notion of indie on the one hand and concrete, local and situated accounts of production (and play) on the other. Each paper makes a substantial contribution but the collection is worth reading as a totality for the numerous unanticipated conjunctions and productive intersections it presents.

Consider Nadav Lipkin's and Stephanie Fischer and Alison Harvey's papers for instance. Lipkin's paper is a fitting introduction to the collection since it usefully illustrates the ways that the notion of indie is a politically unstable and contested term, especially following its history in the context of indie film making. In its ideological register, the concept of indie does identity work by referring to both a style and a mode of production that is not 'mainstream.' As always in tales of cultural production and appropriation, the politics of being other than mainstream only works if the mainstream remains stable and the lessons for a radical cultural politics deriving from this move alone are not encouraging. A case in point maybe Stephanie Fischer and Alison Harvey's attentive consideration of the Toronto indie effort to start a program to encourage women's participation in game making communities. The organizers of 'Dames Making Games' may have started with a politics similar to what Lipkin (and also Ruffino in this issue) describes

but Fischer and Harvey carefully unpack an internal and implicit cultural politics to the idea of being indie that cannot be sustained simply by being ‘other’ to the mainstream. Fisher and Harvey do well to show the difficult and practical work of being indie in the negotiation of collective goals and values, the politics of gender, the management of personal relationships, problems of representation and variations in the understanding of practice. Their paper shows us signs of a radical cultural politics on the horizon; one with a measure of self-critical reflexivity that does not necessarily presuppose a condition of being ‘indier than thou.’

The next three papers are essential contributions for developing a cultural analytical approach to making sense of indie. Felan Parker focuses on art games as related and allied objects to independent games. He constructively moves away from the concern with developing a warranting aesthetics for games as art and instead begins to sketch out the contours of a developing “artworld” composed of a myriad of social structures (festivals, game jams, industry development programs, online communities, developer associations, fans and academic programs). This assemblage creates a cultural opportunity space for the legitimation of games as art and designers as artists.

Abe Stein takes a similar approach but focuses instead on indie sports games. He is curious, in particular, about the important role of public events, fans and spectatorship in helping to constitute the experience of a kind of cultish independence of games like *Hokra*, *BaraBariBall* or *J.S. Joust*. Stein’s paper not only helps us to break away from the model of the single player contemplative experience that defines most indie and art games but he also opens the door to making sense of art game audiences as being like sports game spectators and fans. This has always been a fine line anyway but indie games offer new avenues of exploration in this regard.

Emma Westecott’s paper offers to take the cultural analysis of indie even further. Beyond the constitutive art worlds and spectatorship for games lie practice based cultural movements that both feed, and feed from, the indie game scene. DIY culture, the maker and craft movements are all broader based public cultures of practice that supply bodies, values, knowledge, resources and skills to independent game development in a way that suggests a much larger ecological story about technology, design and the public sphere is on the horizon. Westecott’s concern has the by-product of drawing our analytic attention away from the frail economic dynamics of the game and technology industries that indie first supposes it is a reaction to, and instead turns our gaze to the more difficult to trace and often subcutaneous public and subcultural groups that have already taken design into their own hands. It remains to be seen how the more visible indie game scene (because of its mainstream industry proximity and economic potential) will impact the more diffuse maker cultures that feed it.

Our next two papers return to the question of what is indie and my hope is that the previous papers now supply new grist for the mill in tackling this question. Daniel Joseph’s paper provides us with a kind of template for a case study how we might proceed with the analysis of games-as-made. Drawing on a set of depth interviews with a single developer in Toronto, Joseph works towards articulating levels of analytical scale from the interpersonal relationships and informal trade that enable small scale indie game making to the macro level of economic policy shaped by the Ontario Media Development Corporation. Whether the designer should be at the fulcrum of such a story is a matter of debate but Joseph is surely pointing the way toward future

case studies.

Paolo Ruffino's paper returns us to the politics of indie by attempting to delve more deeply into cultural discourses surrounding the idea of independence. It is a good companion piece for Lipkin's and Parker's papers but I wanted to offer it as a follow up to Joseph's case study as a way of talking again about why cultural discourses and ideological analysis are still important for making sense of the local practices of indie culture. If Joseph is accurate in trying to describing what might be called the practical assemblage work of an indie developer then Ruffino's analysis is useful in helping us understand both the personal and public forms of legitimation for that assemblage work.

Ruffino completes the collection of long papers for this issue but as a bonus we have added four other shorter papers that are directed at opening up discussion of the possibilities and potentialities for future research. Jennifer Whitson's piece is useful for making analytic space for understanding indie within the broader cultural economic story about shifts in the game industry. Jason Della Rocca and Jonathan Lessard provide personal accounts of the Montreal and Quebec scenes and in particular show us the ways in which 'indies' have nuanced local histories that are ignored at our peril. Finally, Sean Gouglas and Geoffrey Rockwell call us to task as academic researchers and articulate some ways that university and college programs could be implicated in the indie scene.

Onwards to an Indie Game Studies

There is little left to say by way of introduction other than to encourage readers to grapple with the entirety of the issue and then engage with the discussion. There is a great deal of interesting work left to do, and as some of the authors have pointed out, there are great opportunities also for redefining game studies in collaboration with a cultural movement we have some political affinity with. In addition to this, I have also intimated that, indie or not, our concern over the question has useful epistemological repercussions. With the question of indie the question of provenance, of who made this and how, returns. This seems less a matter of the deep and heavy structures of capitalism and more a matter of bricolage and the transparency of game-making as a social-material practice. Mainstream industry game-making is big and complicated but it can and has been post-industrialized. Indie game making is messy and complex and there may be the hope that within and alongside this messiness and complexity game studies has finally found its object.

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